

A CASE OF REAL DISTRESS.



The cattle plague is not a pleasant subject for an article in a pleasant magazine; and the Editor of *Once a Week* is very wise in keeping it excluded from his columns; though, I dare say, every poet is bringing him fresh offers to write upon the matter, from writers who have either some new cure to suggest, or some old jokes to introduce about the Russian rinderpest and the Italian grinderpest, and about the reason why the cattle plague is like a poisoned bit of cheese: the answer of course being, Because the cat'll die of it.

Still I wish to say what happened to me lately through the plague, and it really was no joke, as, I think, it will be granted.

For the benefit of his health, the other day I went to see a country friend of mine, whose brains required enlivening by my sprightly London small-talk. *His* reason for my visit was that I looked seedy, and required fresh air and quiet, which latter in his neighbourhood is certainly abundant.

“Come and stay a week with us, and we’ll soon set you up, and make quite a new man of you.

This was how he phrased his friendly invitation: and I mentally replied that, as an act of purest charity, I would tear myself away from London for a week, and devote my wits to keeping him from snoring after dinner.

The artful fellow did not tell me, when he wrote, that the district where he lived had been especially infected, and that in consequence he drank his tea and coffee without cream, and let neither milk, nor beef, nor butter be seen upon his table. Now, like our Yankee cousin, I am vastly fond of “cow-juice, and I never have been able to acquire the Russian taste for tea with lemon sprinkled in it. Milk or cream of some sort is essential to my comfort, and in London I have never any trouble in procuring it. All throughout last summer, when the cows were at their worst, I had abundant cream for breakfast, and I never dreamed of asking if it were deleterious. One learns in London not to be too nice about one’s food; and I should about as soon have analysed a sausage at a chophouse, as have thought of ascertaining if the sediment I noticed at the bottom of my cream-jug were cow-born or calcareous.

I discovered these privations the first evening of my visit, for, as I had forgotten to say when I was coming, I found upon arrival that my friend, his wife, and daughters had all gone out to dinner. “The childring,’ said the servant, “were agoing to hev their tea,” which I took as a broad hint that it was no use asking cook to serve a solitary banquet for me. So I meekly replied that I should like to have some tea; “and a little dry toast, please,” I added, with more boldness,

resolving that I would not eat a meal without some cookery.

Ten minutes were allowed here for refreshment with a hair-brush and a bit of soap and towel, and I then in stately solitude proceeded to the Banquet Hall, with an appetite which even an Eton boy might envy. There I found a tea-tray — (how I do hate tea-trays! they remind me so of gruel, sago, broth, and being ill!) — and on this tea-tray was a teapot, with the tea all ready made— (how I hate tea kitchen-made! they might have known I always like to make my tea myself!), — and beside it were a slop-basin, a plate, a cup, a saucer, a spoon, and some dry toast. Humph! I thought, a rather literal translation of my order. But, being in a friend's house, I restrained my indignation, and gently rang the bell, and mildly said that I felt rather hungry after my long journey, and should like a little something in the meat way, — “a slice of cold roast beef or so,” I suggested at a venture, thinking it the likeliest of dainties to demand. Said “the neat-handed Phillis ” (her real name, I hear, is Victoria Matilda, but her employers call her Ann), “Please, sir, cook don't buy no beef now, master says it's bad; but there's a nice cold line o' pork, sir; leastways, the scrag end there is, for we had it for our dinners, and I'm feared it's most all eet.”

Cold pork! ugh! she might as well have given me “cold pig”! Fancy a man fasting for nine hours and a quarter, and sitting down in cold blood to cold pork with his tea! From that scrag end of pork what dreams might come, did give me pause. I shuddered and declined; and endeavoured to console myself by pouring out some tea. “But, stop! ” I cried, as Phillis was about to leave the presence; “you've forgotten to bring the milk.”

“Master won't allow no milk to be took in now, sir, cos the cows is all so bad.”

“Oh, very well,” I sighed despairingly, and Phillis mutely fled. But the next moment almost I had to summon her again; for I discovered that there was not any butter on the table, and I hate eating dry toast unless there's lots of butter on it.

“Master’s giv strict horders not to buy no butter, sir, cos he says as it’s *deceased!*”

This was the servant’s last reply. A voice replied, “It’s all my eye!” But this the voice said inwardly; for base indeed is he who casteth ridicule upon a friend before a handmaid of the same. Still, when Phillis had departed, I could not help reflecting, as I sipped my creamless tea and crunched my too dry toast, that to keep oneself, and wife, and friends, and family, and servants, sans cream, sans milk, sans veal, sans butter, and sans beef, must certainly be somewhat of a saving to a man; and I did not so much wonder at Brown’s friendly invitation “to come and stay a week” with him, seeing that he knew quite well to what a stinted larder my fine appetite would come.

Next morning he of course was profuse in his apologies for being out when I arrived: “But you know, you should have written, my dear fellow, and then we would have had all ready for your royal highness, and have killed our fatted calf.”

“But isn’t it *deceased?*” I could not help inquiring, casting a sly glance at Phillis as I spoke.

This little joke of mine restored me to good humour, for I own that my fine temper had been a little ruffled by my scant repast. So, instead of leaving by first train, as I had hungrily resolved in the still watches of the night, I heroically determined to stay the whole week through, and starve on creamless tea and butterless dry toast. How far towards starvation I proceeded in my visit I may possibly ere long find time enough to tell.

H. Silver.

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